New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Wisteria Trees"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 30, 1950

Helen Hayes Blooms In 'Wisteria Trees'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Helen Hayes is giving a fragrant, lacy performance of a decadent Southern aristocrat in a lackluster play called "The Wisteria Trees." Joshua Logan has based it on Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard."

The central figure is one to tempt any actress. An exquisite charmer, Lucy Ransdell has been taught neither character nor sense by her upbringing. She lives in an aura of perfumed rejection of anything practical. Like all the Camilles and Manons of fiction, she inevitably moves toward destruction, and takes her family with her.

In this case she has returned home to Louisiana in the '90s from a sordid love affair in Paris. She had turned to this after her drunken husband died, and her child was drowned.

Never More Beautiful.

This is not a play of plot, but rather a reflection on social and economic change. Lucy is repeatedly warned that the plantation she professes to love will be sold at auction unless she does something to save it. She refuses to be bored with business. Finally the place is knocked down to the now rich son of a poor white farmer on the estate.

Even then Lucy has fragile, aimless and noble little plans. Actually there is nothing to do but return to Paris and the dying lover who had robbed her.

Miss Hayes has probably never in her entire career looked more beautiful. The period gowns are admirably becoming, and she rings the changes on this elegant dupe with alarming guile and appreciation.

Once Miss Hayes' inherent honesty lets one accept her character's slovenly moral sense, the story becomes quite touching.

Differs From Chekhov.

The play itself seems grown from indecision, or perhaps too frequent decision. Chekhov is terribly simple. His people chatter surface nonsense while great climaxes take place in corners where they refuse to look. The irony of this is an end in itself, and he never resorts to tricks to make his comment more obvious.

In place of this astringency, Mr. Logan has over and over substituted a romantic method of highlighting ideas, but has not bolstered the narrative so it will support his artifice.

One example of this is the first-act curtain, which has Lucy carefully picking up the telegrams from her lover, which she has previously ripped to pieces without reading. Another ends the second act, when at a party Lucy learns that the house has been sold, and says, "We've just changed hosts in midstream."

The servants are played well within the low comedy outlines provided them. They lack dignity, and consequently authenticity, for the circumstances.

Peggy Conklin makes her cool points without frills as a spinster cousin, and Bethel Leslie is an attractive and exasperated daughter of Lucy.

Kent Smith is stolid and frustrated as the newly rich purchaser of the estate, and Walter Abel is engaging as a lush, Lucy's middle-aged brother who still has servants help him to bed.

With all its alleged grip on the inhabitants' emotions, the wisteria blossoms looked pretty pallid in their dramatic unveiling.

Miss Hayes' vehicle has elements that are reminiscent of "The Age of Innocence" and "The Little Foxes" as well as its Chekhov source. But, in order, it lacks their romance, guts and spare honesty.

"THE WISTERIA TREES"

Play by Joshua Logan, based on Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard"; staged by Mr. Logan; setting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; musical arrangements by Lehman Engel; presented by Leland Hayward and Mr. Logan at the Martin Beck Theatre, March 29, 1950. The cast:

Dolly May.....Vinie Burrows
Martha.....Peggy Conklin
Henry Arthur Henry.....Maurice Ellis
Yancy Loper.....Kent Smith
Scott.....Alonzo Bosan
Lucy Andree Ransdell.....Helen Hayes
Antoinette.....Bethel Leslie
Cassie.....Georgia Burke
Gavin Leon Andree..Walter Abel
Bowman Witherspoon.....G. Albert Smith
Jacques.....Ossie Davis
Peter Whitfield..Douglas Watson
Solo Singer....Maude Simmons

Synopsis: Scene: The children's parlor and part of the outside gallery of Wisteria Plantation, Louisiana. Time: The end of the last century. Act I: Spring. Act II: Scene 1: Summer. Scene 2: Autumn. Act III: Winter.

Journal American

March 30, 1950

A Favorable Decision But Not a Knockout

By ROBERT GARLAND

All the perfected professionalism of "The Wisteria Trees" moves me less than is obviously intended. This should not be! For none of the theatre's artful aides is neglected where the Joshua Logan Americanization of Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" is concerned. Many an artful aid is at its most artful.

Meticulously put on by Leland Hayward and Mr. Logan, with beautiful backgrounds by Jo Mielziner, becoming costumes by Lucinda Ballard, moody music by Lehman Engel, an excellent cast of which Helen Hayes is star, in which Kent Smith, Walter Abel and Peggy Conklin are featured, and Douglas Watson should be—

At the Martin Beck, the Dixieised Russians are fascinating. The Lucy Andree Ransdell who used to be Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevsky returns from Paris to her Wisteria Trees in Louisiana. The Antoinette who used to be Anya, the Gavin who used to be Gaev, and the Loper who used to be Lopahin, surround her.

And their "way-down-South-in-the-land-of-cotton" troubles are interesting. As translator of "The Cherry Orchard" to "The Wisteria Trees," Joshua Logan has brought them to America with skill and ingenuity. But, as fellow countrymen with better days behind them, they do not break my heart as they broke my heart as Russians.

• • •

Axes Sound Hollow

But I forget that "The Wisteria Trees" is "a new American play," written by Joshua Logan and "based on Anton Chekhov's 'The Cherry Orchard'." As such, the entire action—what there is of it—takes place in the children's parlor, and part of the outside gallery, of Wisteria Plantation, Louisiana.

Lucy Andree Ransdell, first lady of Wisteria Plantation, is returning home from Paris. There, she has taken on a lover. A train whistles mournfully in the distance. Horses hoofs are heard outside. The wanderer comes in surrounded by her retinue. In it is an old family retainer, now Scott.

After which, in the children's parlor but never in the country or the drawing-room, Lucy Andree Ransdell faces her future bravely. It is a future anything but black as outlined in "The Wisteria Trees." But Lucy does refuse to marry Yancy Loper, a fine example of rich white trash and the most marriagable man around.

Lucy's daughter, Antionette, and brother, Gavin, fall into good luck, too. The former gets Peter Whitfield, a rising young Decimus Junius Juvenalis of the South. The latter gets a cushy job in the local bank . . . The axes, cutting down the Wisteria trees, at the play's finale, sound kind of hollow.

• • •

First Rate Theatre

Do not get me wrong! This "The Cherry Orchard" into "The Wisteria Trees" is first-rate theatre. The painstaking Leland Hayward-Joshua Logan producing touch is constantly upon it. And the actors act it always with honesty, frequently with skill. A good show, there is no heartbreak in it.

Helen Hayes' impersonation of Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevsky into Lucy Andree Ransdell—if "The Wisteria Trees" is a new American play merely based on "The Cherry Orchard," I wonder why the Russian names are so faithfully rendered into English?—is well studied and technically perfect. But not overly believable.

Among the featured players, Kent Smith's Yancy Loper comes across most consistently. Because it does, the owner of Wisteria Plantation adds to her not-so-brightness by refusing his bank account and hand in lawful deep South matrimony. The daughter of Bethel Leslie does better by the poet of Douglas Watson.

Maybe I expected too much of this Leland Hayward-Joshua Logan production of the Joshua Logan-Anton Chekhov "The Wisteria Trees." Maybe I expected bravos and cheers at last night's premiere instead of applause and curtain calls. Maybe I expected knockout instead of a very favorable decision.

Herald Tribune (NEW YORK)

March 30, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

Helen Hayes's Trees

HELEN HAYES is as luminous and artful as ever in "The Wisteria Trees" which has opened at the Martin Beck. It is cause for rejoicing that she is back on Broadway again after a two-year absence. She brings intensity, warmth and poignance to a curiously dislocated adaptation of a classic. For Joshua Logan calls his drama "a new American play" and hastens to add that it is based on Anton Chekov's "The Cherry Orchard." It is Louisiana at the end of the last century instead of Russia that frames the decay of a genteel society. There are affecting moments in the production, of which the author is co-sponsor and director, but it is a laggard show.

* * *

Without the presence of Miss Hayes in the part of Lucy Andree Ransdell, the original Mme. Ranevsky, the play would have little momentum or meaning. As an expatriate from Paris, who returns to her plantation to find it put up for auction, she floods scene after scene with beauty and emotional power. Logan has conceived a far happier ending than that in the Chekov original, even though the axes are hewing down the wisterias as inexorably as they were the cherry trees. The alterations have not been inspired. There is no *fin du siecle* in "The Wisteria Trees," but merely the dissolution of a reckless and big-hearted Southern aristocrat. The second act recaptures some of the desperate and comic accents of "The Cherry Orchard," but the work as a whole is disappointing.

* * *

Kent Smith gives the star her most valuable assistance as a newly rich "turkeyneck" who buys a stately mansion from a family which would not even allow him in the kitchen with Negro children as a boy. His portrayal of Yancy Loper is emphatic and always in the right key. The scene in which he promises to save the plantation if Lucy will marry him and then gives orders for its destruction is vividly theatrical. For too much of the time Logan has concerned himself with minor variations of a literal translation, and most of them have little heart. A dying society fitted better into the pattern of Czarist Russia than it does in Louisiana of fifty years ago.

As Lucy's brother, who has allowed the estate to go to rack and ruin after she has eloped to Paris, Walter Abel is far less persuasive than Smith. Peggy Conklin plays the cousin and housekeeper effectively, while Douglas Watson and Bethel Leslie are fine as the lovers who find happiness instead of defeat in the ending. The Negro players are uniformly excellent, particularly Ossie Davis, Alonzo Bosan and Georgie Burke. The Jo Mielziner setting is splendid and Lucinda Ballard's costumes are captivatingly in the period of the play. As for the Logan direction, it falters as often as the script does. "The Wisteria Trees" has Helen Hayes at the top of her form in an interesting piece of stage metamorphosis which does not entirely come off.

The New York Times

March 30, 1950

Helen Hayes Returns in Logan's 'The Wisteria Trees,' Set on a Louisiana Plantation

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Helen Hayes has found a fine part and is giving it the richest performance of her career. She is the lovable but shiftless mistress of a decayed Louisiana plantation in Joshua Logan's "The Wisteria Trees," which was acted at the Martin Beck last evening. This is the drama of amiable disintegration that Mr. Logan has written on the theme of Chekhov's immortal "The Cherry Orchard."

Basically it is the same story of an incompetent aristocracy which Mr. Logan has transposed from old Russia to the old South. Despite the deliberate parallels in plot and character relationships, he is wise in describing "The Wisteria Trees" as "a new American play" instead of an adaptation of Chekhov's Russian reverie.

For the resemblances between the Southern and Russian aristocracy are more superficial than you might suppose, and Lucy Andree Ransdell is softer, gayer and less immovable than Madame Ranevsky, who refuses to face the new realities in Chekhov's play. Both the philosophical spirit and the literary texture of "The Cherry Orchard" are finer than "The Wisteria Trees" which, indeed, is curiously insensitive at times. Mr. Logan's devices can be too facile for comfort.

* * *

But that has not inhibited him from writing an absorbing and moving drama of an old family that is going decorously to pieces—full of charm, loyalty and devotion, but laid barren through prejudices that have lost their validity in a world that has tougher things in mind. Like "The Cherry Orchard," "The Wisteria Trees" is casual in tone and loose in structure. But it catches admirably the imperceptible though rigid relationships that keep the characters apart. And a deep sadness lies at the roots of the wisteria trees. An epoch ends, a dynasty departs.

Although Mr. Logan has had some trouble with the writing, the performance is magnificent. Jo Mielziner has designed a beautiful Southern room that is full of homely details, broken lattices and rain-stained ceilings; and the wisteria-hung forest rises outside. Under Mr. Logan's direction the performance captures the languid, drifting, hopeless life of a cultivated family with their friends and servants going down the years to some unimagined doom.

Happily restored to the theatre, Miss Hayes is at the peak of her form, acting with warmth of spirit and delicate craftsmanship. The part is fascinating, it contains so many whims and disarming crotchets—courage and remorse, snobbery and friendship, imperious assumptions with gentle manners. Miss Hayes is the mistress of the part as well as the manor. In a shining performance she expresses the meek, half-realized, submissive tragedy of a great lady who cannot make decisions and cannot escape the past.

The acting is superb throughout. As the bull-necked man of business, torn between sentiment and power, Kent Smith gives a stunning performance. He has caught perfectly every detail of a complicated character. Walter Abel is excellent as the footless though well-mannered brother. In the part of the poor relation, Peggy Conklin is extraordinarily perceptive and lucid. There is a charming portrait of the daughter by Bethel Leslie. And Douglas Watson acts a Southern intellectual with great insight and skill. G. Albert Smith gives a pleasant performance as an old neighbor.

All the Negro parts are acted with distinction—Alonzo Bosan as the ancient retainer; Ossie Davis as the swagger cosmopolite who cannot forget that he has seen Paris; Vinnie Burrows as the plantation coquette, Georgia Burke as the old nurse and Maurice Ellis as the awkward, stumbling houseboy.

During the week when the wisteria hangs heavy on the vine in Louisiana, everyone has conspired to make Mr. Logan's play beautiful and fragrant in the harsher climate of Gotham. And Miss Hayes has come back to us with gifts we all love and admire.

Daily Mirror

March 30, 1950

'Wisteria Trees' A Hit With Helen Hayes

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The amazing Joshua Logan has done an excellent paraphrase of Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard." Now called "The Wisteria Trees," the Russians have become dreamy, wasteful, ineffectual Louisiana aristocrats, and capable, far-sighted nouveau riche. The familiar characters are all there, and so is the essential spirit of the Chekhov work.

We have always considered "The Cherry Orchard" a mood rather than a play, a philosophical statement rather than exciting drama. It is life rather than a theatrical condensation of life. It is tragedy through inertia. It is your dish if you like frustration contrasted with achievement—in a quiet sort of way.

The heroine is now called Lucy Andree Ransdell, owner of an unprofitable southern estate, debt-ridden and being choked to death by parasitical wisteria vines. The ruthless, go-getting hero is now known as Yancy Loper, Louisiana "turkey neck" with a consuming passion and ability for making money. Lucy loses her plantation to Yancy in preference to marrying him. After all, there is her faithless, spendthrift lover awaiting her in Paris.

We have seen a number of revivals of "The Cherry Orchard" in our time, and Logan's version of it is one of the best. Of course, he has dialogued it in his own fashion, and it is better dialogue than we have heard in most literal translations.

The versatile Logan also serves as director and co-producer with Leland Hayward. The staging is on the static side, but so is the play. Jo Mielziner has designed a wonderfully atmospheric plantation playroom, and Lucinda Ballard some colorful costumes.

Hayward and Logan have been fortunate, indeed, in persuading Helen Hayes to return to the stage as the romantic, unconventional and indolent Lucy Ransdell. She plays the role with charming realism and graceful authority. Kent Smith, as Yancy of the Midas touch, and Walter Abel, as Lucy's impractical brother, are also outstanding.

Douglas Watson has some fine moments as an idealistic, poetical tutor, trying to cope with the future. Peggy Conklin, Bethel Leslie and G. Albert Smith are good in other roles.

Ossie Davis, Maurice Ellis,